Keeping a Good Thanksgiving
October 29, 2013

John M. Buchanan
Women of Wisdom, Loyola Academy

Thanksgiving is the favorite holiday for many people. I am one of them. It is the least commercialized – can't hold a candle to Halloween and Mothers' Day, not to mention Christmas/Hanukkah. Not that Sur La Table and William Sonoma aren't trying. I'm receiving daily emails offers of stuff that will make my Thanksgiving feast the best ever. There are a few Thanksgiving greeting cards, but no gifts to purchase, wrap and post, not many Thanksgiving cocktail parties and receptions, no seasonal music outside the churches – and by the way, the music of gratitude is some of the best music all religions sing. But, all in all, an American Thanksgiving is wonderful in simplicity: a time to gather with family and dearest friends, to enjoy one another, to enjoy an amazing meal – with its own family traditions and somewhere along the way to count our blessings and to say thanks.

It is the quintessential, most American of holidays. Harvest festivals are as old as the human race: the mysterious fertility of the earth; the rituals of planting, tending, nurturing and harvesting. And at the end the assurance that life is now possible for another year. From the beginning of time people have paused in their daily routines at harvest time. – to celebrate their good fortune, usually by eating and drinking – and expressing gratitude — to the gods, to Mother Earth, who in her own rhythms is responsible for fertility, regeneration, reproduction, in agriculture, animal husbandry and human reproduction, all of which ancient people understood were both absolutely essential to their ongoing survival, but also not altogether under their control: there was surprise, mystery and delight in the whole process.

Nearly every civilization developed some kind of harvest or fertility celebration – mostly involving eating and drinking and some kind of communal gratitude expression. The Celts lived close to nature and became avid admirers of creation. The early English had elaborate Harvest Festivals.

Our story begins in 1620. British settlers brought the tradition of Harvest Festival with them. President George Washington implored the new nation to be grateful for independence, security, freedom and plenty. It was Abraham Lincoln who, during the Civil War actually declared Thanksgiving to be a national holiday.

The late William Sloane Coffin said that he was really "into Thanksgiving, because it was the only victimless national holiday if you can overlook several million turkeys." [Collected Sermons, p.39]

The subtitle for this lecture presentation: “Keeping a Good Thanksgiving” is “Hooray for the Pumpkin Pie.” That is the last line from the only secular Thanksgiving song I know – Over the River and Through the Woods to Grandmother’s House We Go.

A Wall Street Journal writer did a piece on it and pointed out that it is a nineteenth century poem by Lydia Maria Child, set to music.

Over the river and through the woods

To Grandmother’s house we go.

The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh

Through with and drifted snow.

Over the river and through the woods,

O how the wind does blow

It stings the toes and bites the nose

As over the ground we go.

There are several more stanzas and the poem comes to a grand conclusion:

Hooray for the fun

Is the pudding done?

Hooray for the pumpkin pie!

Once a week preachers, of all kinds, try to dig into a text and extract a few ideas, preferably three. Happily there are three pretty good ideas in Lydia Maria Child’s poem.

The first is that Thanksgiving requires at least a few more people than yourself. You can do it alone, but gratitude comes a little easier when you have other people with you. Eric Felton, the Wall Street Journal writer, has a little fun suggesting that if Thanksgiving isn’t what it used to be it’s Lydia Maria Child’s fault – Over the river and through the woods – It’s Grandmother: Who wants to go to Grandmother’s house and spend time

with old people? And “over the river and through the woods…” – the modern equivalent is standing in a huge line at O’Hare, stripping off your jacket, shoes and belt for the Transportation Safety Administration pat down (thank be to God for these full body scans – with two hip replacements I have set off alarms and been patted down and groped more times than I can remember…I digress) the modern equivalent Over the River and Through the Woods is that dreadful airport experience or sitting in your car in gridlock on the interstate – all for a chance to spend a full day making small talk with your in-laws.

Well, yes; but it was, for me, the occasion when my grandparents came to our house and mother got out the china and silver and we sat a the dining room table and there were candles even and the turkey…deep in the aroma memory department of my brain, on the top shelf, in fact, is the smell wafting up the stairs to my bedroom while I was still sleeping - of that turkey she had put in the oven before dawn. It makes my mouth water still.

Dad always put a tie on and began serving drinks as soon as the arrival of Grandma and Alec (he didn't’ want to be a grandparent and insisted that we call him by his first name), Uncle Short, Aunt Helen and Uncle Charles. It was a big deal.

Thanksgiving requires people and it requires good food. That’s the second important idea in our text. Hooray for the Pumpkin Pie!

The problem with that is that you and I live our lives miles away from our food. Earlier harvest festivals were created by people who did the ploughing, planting, hoeing, cultivating; who fretted about the weather, an early freeze, too little rain, too much rain, who harvested the crop, milked the cows, arranged for breeding and were there in the middle of the night when the calves came; who collected and separated the eggs, fed and cleaned up and butchered the turkey. We’re very remote from any of that, at least most of us. Our food comes from Dominicks, Treasure Island, Whole Foods- which at least tries to remind us where our food comes from. But mostly it was grown miles away, process, shrink-wrapped, sealed and brought to the store in the middle of the night. I picked up a cantaloupe last week and the little sticker said it was from Chile.

If there is truth to the suggestion that we have lost our capacity for gratitude, part of the reason has to do with our literal and figurative distance from the natural world, our alienation from nature and the environment.

I’m sure many of you have read Michael Pollan on the topic of food and how it is produced. *Omnivore’s Dilemma* will forever change the way you think about dinner. In fact, the book was the reason close friends of ours, owners of a construction company, sold out, left downtown Chicago condo life, bought a farm and are raising organic, grass fed, low line Black Angus

cattle in Michigan. Pollan describes the overwhelming preponderance of corn in our agricultural system and the huge distance food travels to our table. He advocates food grown locally and in season. You can live without strawberries in February. And those round, red things masquerading, as tomatoes in January don't even come close to those beauties we buy at the Farmers' Market in August. By the way, I put the Chilean cantaloupe back and decided to wait.

The culmination of Pollan's book is a "Perfect Meal" that meets all his criteria and what he prepares himself: picks beans and greens from his garden, bakes bread from special organically grown wheat, cultivates the yeast, hunts for mushrooms, buys a gun and learns to shoot and actually kills a wild pig.

The meal is all that he hopes for and more, shared by his wife and son and some close friends.

Describing the meal, Pollan writes: "I had wanted to say more, to express a wider appreciation for the meal we were about to eat, but I was afraid to offer words of thanks for the pig and the mushrooms and the forests and the garden would come off sounding corny….The words I was reaching for, of course, were words of grace….I realized that in this particular case, words of grace were unnecessary, because that's what the meal had become for me certainly, a wordless way of saying grace." [p. 407]

A Good Thanksgiving requires other people and it requires good food. My favorite food writer is not the familiar authors and food show hosts. It as Robert Farrar Capon, an Episcopal Priest, a pretty good theologian, and a true gourmet connoisseur. He died two weeks ago. He wrote a dozen or so books, a lot about food and cooking and religion. My favorite is *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*. Craig Claiborne, long time food writer for the New York Times said *The Supper of the Lamb* was "one of the funniest, wisest, and most unorthodox cookbooks ever written."

In the preface, Farrar writes (and pardon me if a little religion slips in this here and there) "There is a habit that plagues many so-called spiritual minds: they imagine that matter and spirit are somehow at odds with each other and that the right course for human life is to escape from the world of matter into some finer and purer (and undoubtedly duller) realm. To me that is a crashing mistake – and it is above all a theological mistake. Because, in fact, it was God who invented dirt, onions and turnip greens; God who invented human beings with their strange compulsion to cook their food… Food and cooking are among the richest subjects in the world. Every day of our lives, they occupy, refresh and delight us. Food is not just some fuel we need to get us going toward higher things. Cooking is not a drudgery we put up with in order to get the fuel delivered. Rather, each is a heart's astonishment. Both stop us dead in our track with wonder. Even

more they set us down evening after evening and over the company that forms around our dinner tables, they actually create our humanity."

Capon says that there is almost no food that is not tasty if prepared thoughtfully and lovingly. He did have prejudices, however. He wrote: " I avoid, when possible, mild hams, New York State wines, thin bacon, vodka and all diets. I think turkey is, if not overrated, at least over-served. I enjoy cocktails (other than cute ones)….Some of them, like the martini, are marvelous inventions, but man has yet to find a civilized use for them. I am also against margarine, "prepared foods", broiled grapefruit, marshmallow sweet potatoes and whipped cream in pressurized cans."

My favorite Capon anecdote is this: "Food these days is often identified as the enemy. Butter, salt, sugar, eggs, are all out to get you. And yet, at our best we know better. Butter is……well, butter. It glorifies almost everything it touches. Salt is the sovereign perfector of all flavors. Eggs are, pure and simple, one of the wonders of the world. And if you put them all together you get, not sudden death, but Hollandaise – which in its own way is not one bit less a marvel than the Gothic arch, the computer chip, or a Bach fugue."

A Good Thanksgiving requires good company, good food and the practice, the discipline of gratitude. Perhaps our very best teachers are those intrepid 17th century Puritans who knew they were and called themselves Pilgrims – and who gave us our Thanksgiving.

It's a great story and it still fascinates and compels me. They were Puritan Separatists. Since the official break with Rome in the 16th Century, over English King Henry VIII's divorces and remarriages, among other reasons, the established church was the Church of England, Anglican. Its head was the King of England and his appointed Archbishop of Canterbury and while retaining many, if not most of the ecclesiastical customs of Roman Catholicism, it was an independent entity. The Puritans thought the Church of England needed reforming. They wanted a simpler, less liturgical, less structured church. When they actually did it, formed Puritan Congregations, the ecclesiastical and political authorities frowned on it. Persecution followed.

One group and their leader, Pastor John Robinson, picked up and left and moved to Holland, a nation where the Protestant Reformation had produced a rare religious freedom. There were several hundred of them living in Leiden. They did well in Holland, but they worried that their children would lose their British identity and English language. So they decided to move again, this time to the New World. They purchased a sixty ton ship, less than 50 feet in length, the Speedwell, refitted it and planned to depart from Southampton to rendezvous with a ship secured by another group of Puritans in London. Leaving Leiden was traumatic. William and Dorothy

Bradford left their 3-year-old son John behind with Dorothy's parents – perhaps never to see him again.

July 1620 they left port and set sail. In the meantime the London party had secured an old but reliable ship named Mayflower – which headed to Southampton to rendezvous with Speedwell.

Mayflower was a typical ship of the day – Square rigged and beak prowed with high, castle-like superstructures fore and aft. Rated at 180 tons (meaning that the hold could accommodate 180 casks of wine – called tuns of wine) she was 100 feet in length.

The commanding officer was Christopher Jones, part owner of the Mayflower. It was known as a "Sweet Ship" – its primary route was back and forth from France trading English woolens from French wine. There was a lot of spillage during the voyage and the acidic wine helped temper the terrible stench of the bilge – thus a "Sweet Ship."

First mate and pilot was Robert Coppin, who had sailed to the New World before. Giles Heale was ship's surgeon, a very important player in the ordeal that lay ahead. On board also was a 21-year-old Cooper, John Alden, who will enter American lore because of his romance with another passenger, Priscilla Mullin.

Captain Miles Standish came on board – not a Puritan. He would be in charge of military matters.

The two ships left Southampton and immediately Speedwell began to leak and so both ships pulled into Dartmouth, 75 miles west. Repairs began. It was August 17 and they were stuck and frightened. They were eating their food much too quickly without making progress.

They departed Dartmouth, got 200 miles out when the Speedwell developed another leak. Now it was September. They turned around again, made for Plymouth, where the decision was made to abandon Speedwell and crowd as many passengers as possible on the Mayflower.

On September 6, 1620, Mayflower set out for Plymouth. There were 102 passengers on board, 20 to 30 sailors, 2 dogs, a spaniel and a larger, smelly, slobbering mastiff. As soon as they set sail in the Atlantic, beating against wind and tide, they because seasick. The sailors had great fun taunting them. No one knew yet about the Gulf Stream and so their speed was an agonizing two miles an hour.

There were 3 pregnant women and two births during the voyage. A young indentured seaman, John Howland, became restless during a gale one night, decided to climb the ladder and step on deck. He was swept into the water as the ship lurched and somehow grabbed the halyard used to lower and

raise the topsail. He held on tight, was dragged ten feet under water but never let go. Several sailors saw it happen, took up the halyard and hauled Howland back in. The story has a nice ending. John Howland not only survived, but married in New England, and he and his wife Elizabeth raised 18 children and lived to enjoy their eighty-eight grandchildren. [p. 32-33]

Conditions on board were dreadful. Passengers were quartered in a space between the hold and the main deck in what was a sort of crawl space called “tween deck.” It was not quite 5 feet high, about 75 feet long. Passengers constructed thin wall compartments of about 25-30 square feet, which allowed a bit of privacy. There was a primitive and dangerous wood-burning fireplace, but because of the delays they ran out of firewood and beer – beer being a Pilgrim staple because of poor water quality. And, of course, there were the chamber pots. Needless to say no one bathed for ten weeks. Two crewmembers died during the voyage.

They made landfall off Cape Cod and the captain realized that they were seriously off course. Their destination, and the land for which they had a license, was near the mouth of the Hudson River. So they came about and headed south only to encounter unfavorable winds. So they turned around again, sailed around Cape Cod – which by the way was familiar to fishing vessels because of the plentiful fish – sailed to the back side of the Cape and put into a safe harbor at Provincetown, Rhode Island.

It was now early November 1620. As they neared their destination, the passengers assembled, signed an agreement about how they would live in the new world. We know it as the Mayflower Compact and elected John Carter to be their leader for one year. 11/11/1620.

They went ashore, fell to their knees in prayer, began to explore and before long encountered natives – who were not particularly happy to see them. A few skirmishes followed and a decision to find another, safer harbor.

So they made their way finally to another safe harbor they named Plymouth and around December 12 began to explore what would be their new home. December 20 they decided to begin building. They chose a 165 foot hill. They named it Plymouth Plantation.

An Indian leader, Massasoit, watched all of this with both fear and fascination. Ultimately he decided not to attack and kill them all and instead sent delegates, first Samoset and then Squanto – who spoke English – to investigate.

And then they started to fall. They harsh North Easter winter, the poor diet – they were still eating the small rations they had brought along. On some days that winter only 10 men were healthy enough to work. By springtime, exactly half of them were dead. Every family had lost someone.

They cleared land and knew that their one chance to survive was a successful crop. It was then that Squanto appeared with advice that literally saved them. He showed them how to plant and how to fertilize. The crop succeeded: they had squash, corn, beans, peas and barley for their beloved beer. And they learned to hunt and fish. That autumn when the crop was in and the small huts – 19 of them secure, Governor William Bradford declared "a time to rejoice after a more special manner." He sent for four men "fowling," with their muskets to bring geese and ducks from the harbor and they welcomed their new friends to the feast. Massasoit and one hundred men showed up and brought along freshly killed deer.

It wasn't exactly a Currier and Ives Thanksgiving. There was no long table with a white linen tablecloth. In fact, they all stood, throwing pieces of meat into a large boiling pot. They ate the stew with their fingers. Forks had not yet appeared. And there probably was no turkey and filling – or stuffing – or dressing. And there certainly was no cranberry sauce.

What there was – was a sense of profound gratitude for life – for their survival, for hope for the future, for an amazingly fertile and productive world, for strangers who became life-giving friends, and for one another.

All this information, by the way, is from *Mayflower, A Story of Courage, Community, and War* by Nathaniel Philbrook. It is a fascinating, reliable and complete history.

In it he summarizes: "The First Thanksgiving marked the conclusion of a remarkable year. Eleven month earlier the Pilgrims had arrived at the tip of Cape Cod, fearful and uninformed. They had spent the next month alienating and angering every Native American they happened to come across. By all rights, none of the Pilgrims should have emerged from the first winter alive. That it worked – was a testament not only to the Pilgrims' great resolve and faith, but to their ability to take advantage of an extraordinary opportunity." Philbrook says the Pilgrims learned quickly about diversity and were pushed out of their extremely tight, inward, almost cult-like worldview. They learned to regard Native Americans as friends – some even as brothers and sisters. And that saved their lives.

It would not last. King Philip's war a few years later pitted Native Americans against European settlers in an all-out, incredibly violent war. But that is another story.

I want now to reflect a bit on Thanksgiving. It requires people, food and the practice of gratitude.

When I was a child I had to be forced to say "thank you." The situation was usually this: a birthday card arrived from my Grandmother and, as always, there were a few dollars, sometimes a five dollar bill, tucked inside. I loved it, counted on it, relished it. But I had to be coerced to say "thank you."

“Have you called your Grandmother yet? Have you thanked her?” “No, but I will – I promise.” For days it would go on: “Have you called her?” “No, but I will – I promise.” Finally, my mother would take me by the scruff of the neck, march me to the telephone, sit me down, put the receiver in my hand, dial Grandma’s number and say “Now do it!”

I was delighted to find a similar vignette in a wonderful little book by Will Schwalbe, *The End of Your Life Book Club*. Schwalbe’s mother was dying and as they spent hours and days in hospital waiting rooms they found themselves talking about books and decided to read books together as long as they could.

Schwalbe remembers 3 great aunts who were very fastidious and socially proper and expected – demanded- thank you notes.

“When they dropped a present in the mail, your thank you should essentially bounce back out of the mailbox to them. If it didn’t, the whole family, cousins and second cousins and all knew about your lack of gratitude.

“The notes could not be perfunctory either. You had to put real elbow grease into them, writing something specific and convincing about each gift. So Christmas afternoon meant laboring over thank you notes. As children we hated the task, but when I saw Mom beam as she thanked people at the hospital, I realized something she had been trying to tell us all along. That there is a great joy in thanksgiving.

“What, (in time) I realized was that a thank you note isn’t the price you pay for receiving a gift, as so many children think it is, a kind of minimum tribute or toll, but an opportunity to count your blessings. And gratitude isn’t what you give in exchange for something: it’s what you feel when you are blessed – blessed to have family and friends who care about you, and what to see you happy. Hence the joy from Thanksgiving. .” [p. 203-204]

C.S. Lewis once also observed that grateful people were the happiest people he knew – that ungrateful people were sour, crabby, unpleasant and not nice to be with. Gratitude, he said, is mental health made visible.

So, my proposal is that gratitude is a practice, a habit, before it is a feeling. What I learned because someone forced me into the practice – what Will Schwalbe learned as well, is that the practice, or habit, of gratitude actually prepares you for the feeling of gratitude.

Religionists and poets know it. At the heart of every religion is gratitude: for the sheer mystery and miracle of existence, that there is something rather than nothing, as the philosophers Leibniz and Heidegger, put it, that you and I are here, that we have life and that there is a world around us that sustains and delights us, that there are other people who please us and enrich us, people we love and people who love us.

“O Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, “ the ancient Psalmist wrote. It’s deeper than formal religion. Religion is my business but gratitude, giving thanks, is not our monopoly. I could launch the argument that you can’t be thankful unless there is someone to be thankful to. But I don’t really believe that. Belief in a creator makes gratitude for creation fuller, stronger, but it is not necessary. Diana Nyad, who swam from Cuba to Key West got into a discussion with Oprah Winfrey about it last week. She said she didn’t believe in a Supreme Being and it took Oprah back a bit. But she added that she felt awe and wonder and gratitude at the beauty of the word and other people. Oprah managed to stir up Atheists all over the country by seeming not to respect atheism – the theology on both sides was pretty squishy. But the issue remains – gratitude is a deeply human experience and to express it, to act on it and say it makes us more deeply, authentically alive. And it makes us happy.

Poets and authors know about it and urge us simply to slow down, take a deep breath, open your eyes and see the gifts all around us.

One of the last things the late John Updike wrote was a personal memoir, *Self Consciousness*. In it he remembers his father-in-law exclaiming repeatedly while driving, “What a view!” When no one else in the car had even noticed. Updike wrote: “ Like him, am I now in my amazed, insistent appreciation of this planet with its scenery and weather – the pathetic discovery the old make that every day and every season has its beauty. That even a walk to the mailbox is a precious experience, that all species of tree and week have their signature and the sky is a pageant of clouds. Aging”, Updike wrote, “call us outdoors after the adult indoors of work….into the lovely supplications we thought we had outgrown as children. We come again to love the plain world, stones and wood, air and water. The act of seeing itself is glorious and of hearing and feeling and tasting.” [p. 246]

Poets remind us to pay attention. It’s one of the reasons to read poetry. They see things most of us miss because we are so busy, in a hurry always to get to the next appointment, the next luncheon engagement, the next items on our full and overcrowded schedule. Mary Oliver lived in Cape Cod and she named her modest little cottage “Gratitude.” In a poem entitled “Praying”

> It doesn’t have to be
>
> the blue iris, it could be
>
> weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
>
> small stones; just
>
> pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don’t try

to make them elaborate, this isn’t

a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which

another voice may speak.

[Thirst, p. 57]

In another poem, she explains

I go out to the dunes and look

and look and look

into the faces of the flowers

such gifts bestowed

can’t be rejected.

If you want to talk about this

come to visit. I live in the

house near the corner, which I have named

Gratitude

[Thirst p. 35]

I was in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, last week speaking at a conference. We had never visited Jackson Hole in the Tetons before so Sue came along and we met up with a daughter and son-in-law. During a free afternoon we drove out of Jackson Hole up through that amazing broad valley, really surrounded by the rugged, high, snow covered mountains. I need help seeing things sometimes – not because my eyesight is difficult, but because I’m a scanner and I’m always in a hurry and thinking about the next thing…..of what is right in front of me now. Diane spotted them— elk out the car window, maybe 50 yards away, a small herd of 15-20 females, quietly grazing. We stopped, rolled down the window, stopped talking and watched. After a minute or so, by which time I was ready to go on to the next thing (fortunately I wasn’t driving) out of a stand of trees emerged the biggest bull elk you could imagine with a huge rack of antlers. He moved so

slowly, with such dignity and grace. He was watching over his small herd – it is the season for romance. But the way he emerged from those trees, so silently and gracefully, touched me deeply and reminded me again of the mystery and the majesty of the world and I said, out loud – Thank you.

The one who made me call Grandma and say thank you, taught me her favorite poem – which I dig out every year at this time. It's by Edna St. Vincent Millay.

'O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!

They winds, thy wide grey skies!

Thy mists that roll and rise.

Thy wood, this autumn day

I do fear

Thou'st made the world too beautiful

this year.